

History 482

Topics in African History

Course Outline

I cannot number all the shaikhs from whom I acquired knowledge. Many a scholar and many a seeker after knowledge came to us from the East from whom I profited, so many that I cannot count them. Many a scholar and many a seeker after knowlege came from the West, so many I cannot count them. May God reward them all with his approval.

Abdullah dan Fodio, 19th Century Fulani statesman-scholar

We must carry our native learning proudly with us like the tortoise his house.

Donatus Ibeakwalam Nwoga, Ph.D., a friend

California Lutheran University
Fall Semester, 1996

Instructor: Charles B. House, Jr., Senior Mentor

TOPICS IN AFRICAN HISTORY

INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

African history is a "tapestry" of many histories. Therefore, a single college course in the subject is necessarily selective. The themes selected for "Topics in African History" are chosen to illustrate the common threads among these many historical developments, and to stimulate the interest of students in further investigation. A further important purpose of the course is to increase the students' awareness of the political, economic, and cultural achievements of Africans prior to the encroachment by Europeans, mainly through the depredations of the slave trade and the imposition of European political and cultural institutions through colonization. The distinguished historian Basil Davidson writes, "Now in the 1990's, with disaster having followed on colonial dispossession, it must be useful to look at what was seldom or never discussed before: at the possibly permanent and surviving value of the experience that came before dispossession. Not as colorful folklore, nor as banal assertion of Africa's possessing a history of its own, but as a value that may be relevant to the concerns and crises of today."

Richard Wright captures the same idea in the dedication of his book, *Black Power*. "To the Unknown African who, because of his primal and poetic humanity, was regarded as a 'thing' to be bought, sold and used as an instrument of production; and who alone in the forests of West Africa, created a vision of life so simple as to be terrifying, yet a vision that was irreducibly human . . ."

RESOURCES:

Textbook: Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa* (Revised Edition), New York, St. Martin's Press, 1995.

Novel: Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*. New York, Doubleday Anchor, 1989.

Film Series : (In class) *Africa, A Voyage of Discovery with Basil Davidson*, 1993

REQUIREMENTS:

- 1 Regular class attendance and participation in discussion.
2. A major term paper on a subject chosen by the student and approved by the Instructor.

EVALUATION:

To be negotiated with the class.

COURSE OUTLINE
History 482 - Fall Semester, 1996

I. Introduction to the Course.

Browse the text, especially the maps. Geography establishes the environmental conditions which in many ways shape the major developments of history. You will be expected to know the main features of the physical geography of the African continent, including vegetation areas, rivers and mountain ranges.

Begin reading *Anthills of the Savannah*.

II. Contemporary Africa: "Age of the AK-47"

TEXT: Chapters 28 - 29 (Pages 407 - 433)
Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*

This review of African history begins with the present, and Africa's present is troubled. The circumstances of European colonialism have left behind a legacy of unstable African governments subject to cycles of chronic civil wars, economic chaos, military dictatorships and *coups d'état*. Liberia and Sierra Leone are recent and visible examples. Civil war smolders in Angola, Chad and Sudan. Somalia has no government. Tribal genocide still erupts in Ruanda and Burundi. An important purpose of the course is to identify the historical forces and developments which result in these social, economic and political conditions. We will also examine those noble achievements, the continuing influence of which may offer hope for the African future.

Achebe's novel expresses in "human" terms the social and political circumstances in a fictionalized West African country. It takes little imagination to identify Achebe's "Kangan" with the author's native Nigeria, which is typical of many nations in post-independence Africa. Beyond its significance as social history, however, *Anthills* is, like all good novels, a reflection of universal human experience.

III. The Beginning: Africa and the World of Antiquity (c. 3000 B.C.E. - 650 C.E.)

TEXT: Chapters 2, 3, and 5 (Pages 14 - 48 and 62 - 77)
Video series, *Africa, A Voyage of Discovery*, Programs 1 and 2.

Egypt and the valley of the Nile, together with the Mediterranean coast of North Africa (the "Mahgrib"), have generally been treated by historians in terms of their relationships with the empires of the ancient Near East and the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome. Equally important is their role in the history of interior Africa.

Western civilization identifies the culture of Egypt and the Nile Valley as one of its original sources. What has recently become more generally recognized is the extent to which that source is authentically African. The Egypt and the city-states of the Nile Valley -- Meroë and Axum -- were a two way channel of commerce and communication between the interior of Africa and the Mediterranean and Near Eastern world and were active players in its culture and economy. Egyptian culture itself was heavily influenced by its southern contacts and served as a channel of African influences into the cultures of the Mediterranean world. This channel operated in both directions, especially with the earliest introductions into Africa of three great world religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This historic interaction is visible at a number of passages of the Old and New Testaments.

IV. The Empires of the Western Sudan (c. 500 - 1800 C.E.)

TEXT: Chapters 6 and 7 (Pages 78 -106), Chapter 13 , pages 181 to 188.
 Video series. Programs 3 and 4

The history of political developments in Africa, like political history everywhere, has been influenced by the patterns of commerce; that is, the ways in which products were exchanged among trading groups. In interesting ways, African commerce has been shaped by the means of transportation across wide -- and widely differing --geographical areas of the continent. Long before the arrival of the Europeans, active trading networks developed across Africa, leading to the growth of powerful states. Linkages were created with Europe, the Middle East and the Orient before Europeans had any direct knowledge of the interior Africa was the "Dark Continent" for Europeans only because of their ignorance of the vigorous activity taking place there, and by their view of Africans as "Primitive "

Following the rise of Islam in the Arabian peninsula and its rapid spread across North Africa, Arabic reports by Moslem scholars and travelers provide a rich resource of information about Africa south of the Sahara, especially their descriptions of the magnificent series of empires which rose and fell across the sub-Saharan "Sahel" : Ancient Ghana, Mali, Songhai and Kanem-Bornu. Trans-Saharan trade between these empires and the Mediterranean trading ports played an important part in the growth of the European economies in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance.

V. "The Neglected Ancestors"

TEXT: Chapter 4 (Pages 49 - 61), Chapter 10 (Pages 138 - 156)

New technologies have often triggered major historical changes. So it was in Africa with the introduction, around 500 B.C.E., of an all-purpose farming implement: the iron-bladed hoe. This revolution in agricultural technology increased food production with consequent increases in the population. Over the next thousand years, the spread of metal-working technology made possible the establishment of communities capable of steadily-expanding population and control of the natural environment.

During what historians identify as "the African Iron Age," Africans developed those socio-political forms which we think of as "traditional." Methods of social control were developed which, so far as human beings are capable, preserved the social order and provided for the transmission of those forms to succeeding generations. Regarded as "primitive" by European conquerors and their client Africans, those traditions were neglected in the formation of African nation-states and their legal codes. Though neglected, these "ancestors" still provide a possible basis for the resolution of Africa's present problems. Is this what Achebe is saying in *Anthills*?

VI. Strangers from the Sea. (c. 1440 - c.1800)

TEXT: Chapter 9 (Pages 122 - 136)

Beginning in the 15th Century, European nations engaged in a vast expansion overseas, seeking the sources of gold and spices and other, less exotic, commodities for which economically-expanding Europe had developed an immense appetite. Led by the Portuguese and Spaniards, and followed closely by the English, Dutch and French, voyages of discovery were undertaken to the Americas, Africa and the Orient. Trading locations were established on the coast of Africa. Even earlier, Arab traders from the Red Sea and Persian Gulf established trading settlements on the East Coast of Africa under the authority of

Moslem rulers in the Persian Gulf. These new trading relationships altered the trading patterns of the African Interior and began the introduction into African societies of European technologies, notably the introduction of firearms, leading to the political destabilization which continues to the present day. As Basil Davidson writes, "With rising European technological supremacy, this was the period in which the foundations for Africa's future dependence on Europe, whether economic or political, was laid." (Davidson, *Africa in History*. p. 206)

VII. The Atlantic Slave Trade (1444 - 1888)

TEXT: Chapter 12 (Pages 170 - 180). See also Chapter 17, pages 251-257.

Slavery was no stranger to African societies, but indigenous African slavery was quite different from the "chattel slavery" introduced by the Europeans. Having exhausted the sources of slave labor among the Native Americans and Native West Indians, Europeans turned to Africa to supply slave labor for cotton and sugar plantations in the Western Hemisphere. Between the 16th and 19th centuries, at least 15 million Africans were forcibly transported to the Americas. As many more lives may have been lost as a result of deaths *en route*, and in the slave-raiding wars among Africans.

The Atlantic slave trade is important to African (and American!) history, not only as a morally reprehensible activity. African societies themselves were destabilized with consequences which persist to the present day. Not to be overlooked is the fact that an Indian Ocean slave trade with the Middle East and the islands of the Indian Ocean existed for centuries with consequences similar to those in the West.

VII. Explorers, Missionaries, Soldiers and the "Scramble for Africa."

TEXT: Chapters 20, 21, and 22. (Pages 289 - 331)
Video Series, Program 5

From the end of the Fifteenth century until the end of the Second World War, the continent of Africa was an arena of competition between European powers without regard to the sensibilities of the Africans themselves, except as they could be used by one side or another. Access to the continent's natural resources and as a market for cheap manufactured goods were important issues, but not the only ones. From Germany's entrance into the competition in 1884, the maneuverings of major European powers in Africa were closely related to the politics of Europe itself leading up to the First World War. The series of Berlin Conferences between 1884-5 and 1891 divided Africa arbitrarily into colonial territories without regard to traditional African territorial allocations. (It can be argued that the more subtle policies of the United States and the Soviet Union with respect to Africa during the period of the "Cold War" were a similar form of geopolitical competition!)

VIII. The Colonial Mentality.

TEXT: Chapters 23 and 24
Video series, Program 6

At their worst, European colonial policies in Africa were rapacious. At their benevolent best, the colonial governments attempted to improve the quality of life for their African subjects (within the budgetary constraints of the sponsoring European governments). As benevolent as the process may have been, the concept of "development" was based on European ideas of "civilization" which ignored or discounted traditional African concepts of dignity and order in society. Where colonial governments granted authority to African subjects, it was generally to those who had become europeanized, thus creating deep divisions within African society. As the textbook notes, "Colonial governments were generally too intent upon *ordering* and *instructing* rather than *consulting* and *supporting* local African initiatives. (p. 373).

IX. Back to "Kangan": Independence and Hopes for the Future

TEXT: Chapters 26 and 27 (Pages 373 - 421)
Video Series, Programs 7 and 8

The colonization process and missionary evangelism brought with them European education. Education at first served to reinforce the idea of European superiority and instilled the idea that the aim of Africans should be to become europeanized. Education, however, produced a number of African intellectuals who were aware of their own cultural identities, who recognized colonial rule, however benevolent, as exploitation, and who launched the struggle for African self-determination. Following the Second World War, colonial governments recognized the inevitability of independence for their colonies and attempted to create independent nations based on European constitutional models. Whether those models are functional in the African setting is problematic, as current conditions on the continent demonstrate.

The question for Africans now is how to discover their own unique social and political identity, having tried for a century to define their institutions in terms of European forms and values. Africa is a part of the "global village." In fact it is Africa which gives us that term to describe the relationship among the world's peoples, and their cultures have much to contribute to our common humanity. How they are to find their own way and make their special contributions in a world dominated by Western technology is a problem only they can master. What may have emerged from the course, however, is the idea that Africans have the resources within their traditional institutions to forge for themselves a peaceful and productive future

Topics in African History
Selected Bibliography

BOOKS:

TEXT: Shillington, Kevin, *History of Africa*, (Rev. Ed.), New York, St. Martin's Press, 1995.

TEXT: Achebe, Chinua, *Anthills of the Savannah*, New York, Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1989. (A novel by a distinguished Nigerian author which accurately portrays the social and political conditions in contemporary West Africa.)

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(Selected original source documents from antiquity to the twentieth century)

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FILM SERIES:

Davidson, Basil, *Africa, A Voyage of Discovery with Basil Davidson*, Boston, MBT/RM Arts/Channel Four Co-Production, in association with Nigerian Television, 1993. (8 programs).

WEB SITE: <http://www.worldafricanet.com>

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